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CIA Official Sherman Kent, 82, Dies

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Sherman Kent, 82, a Yale University history professor who came to Washington in the summer of 1941 and became a major figure in the development of this nation's intelligence community, died March 11 at his home in Washington. He had a form of Parkinson's disease.

He was an early recruit of the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency, and he served abroad as well as in Washington. When the war ended he returned briefly to Yale. Shortly after the outbreak of the Korean conflict he joined the CIA. From the early 1950s until he retired in 1967, he was director of the Office of National Estimates of the CIA.

At his retirement, he received a Career Civil Service Award for having played "a unique role in the development" of the CIA. He also received a President's Award for Distinguished Federal Service, with an accompanying citation stating that he had played "a unique role in improving the contributions of intelligence to our national security."

Colleagues in the intelligence community said Mr. Kent ended, or at least curbed, "a strong tradition of equivocation" in intelligence estimates.

Mr. Kent's particular genius, according to former colleagues, went to both method and organization. First, he had a rare ability to glean significant facts and decipher trends from the morass of information reported from a worldwide network of intelligence sources. And second, he perceived at an early stage that the effectiveness of the National Intelligence Estimate, for which his office was responsible, would depend on direct access to the White House.

"He saw the main art form in which the CIA would distinguish itself was in having the ear of the president," said one former colleague.

As director of the Office of National Estimates, Mr. Kent presided at meetings of intelligence representatives from a variety of departments and agencies—Army, Navy, Air Force, State Department, Atomic Energy Commission and the like—and then sent to the president a distillation of their findings.

His office dealt with such issues as the rate of Soviet aircraft and nuclear weapons production. One notable success was its ability to advise the White House six months in advance of Sputnik in 1957 that the Soviet Union had the capability of launching an earth satellite.

Described as "intellectually demanding but not arrogant," Mr. Kent habitually wore red suspenders, and he liked to hook his thumbs in the galluses and put his feet up on the table during high-level meetings. He was said by friends to have been blunt and forceful and to have had a profound and colorful command of profanity that was "most useful," in the words of a colleague, "in keeping the Army and the Air Force in their place."

Born in Chicago, Mr. Kent moved to California as a child. He lived in Washington from 1911 to 1917 when his father, William Kent, was a Republican congressman from California. He attended Sidwell Friends School here and graduated from Yale, where he also earned a doctorate in history. Throughout his life he refused to be called "Doctor."

By the summer of 1941 he had been teaching a popular course in modern European history at Yale for several years when William J. ("Wild Bill") Donovan, a New York lawyer and World War I Medal of Honor winner, invited him to come to Washington.

At the time Donovan was assembling a cadre of the brightest minds he could find in academia, law and business to determine the nation's intelligence needs in a world war that was certain to involve the United States.

In 1942, Donovan became the first head of the Office of Strategic Services, and his recruits became the first OSS officials. Mr. Kent was put in charge of the Africa section and later was chief of the research and analysis branch. He served in Washington, North Africa and Italy.

After the war Mr. Kent became acting director of the Office of Research and Intelligence at the State Department, taught at the National War College and then returned to his professorship at Yale.

He wrote a book, "Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy," that was published in 1949 and was said by columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop seven years later to have been "the most important postwar book on strategic intelligence."

Mr. Kent's tenure at the Office of National Estimates covered a tumultuous period that included not only the fighting in Korea but also the collapse of French rule in Indochina, the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis and U.S. entry into the war in Vietnam.

In retirement, he wrote a book based on his boyhood experiences on a brother's ranch in Nevada and he produced an unusual set of blocks for children called "Buffalo Blocks."

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth Gregory Kent of Washington; one daughter, Serafina Kent Bathrick of New York; one son, Sherman Tecumseh Kent of Oklahoma City, and four grandsons.